Gendai Haiku and Meaning in Ban'ya Natsuishi's *Hybrid Paradise*

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This brief essay is about an understanding of the essence of modern (or rather postmodern) haiku, and it is meant to offer an explanation as to the reason why such haiku, in particular those by Japanese haiku poet Ban'ya Natsuishi, are frequently deemed incomprehensible. The term 'modern' (or 'postmodern') haiku here does not refer to haiku written in recent times, it is not a chronological descriptor; instead, it refers to a specific subgenre of haiku poetry usually called *gendai* haiku. In the following pages I will consider Ban'ya Natsuishi's volume of haiku *Hybrid Paradise* (2010), focusing specifically (and exclusively) on some meaning-related qualities of haiku.

I find that the term 'postmodern haiku', although necessarily reductive and also potentially problematic,[1] can give as good an idea as to the nature of *gendai* haiku as it is possible. Providing an accurate definition for *gendai* haiku (which literally translates into English as 'modern haiku', certainly less than useful a definition) can be challenging. Charles Trumbull writes that "when I was struggling to understand what is meant by the term for poets today I asked among others Ban'ya Natsuishi, a well-known exponent of the subgenre. His tautological reply: '*Gendai* haiku?—that's what I write[.]'" (113-14). Although it certainly does not bring one closer to a definition, it at least underlines the fact that it indeed makes sense to consider Ban'ya Natsuishi's haiku *gendai* haiku.

Gendai haiku is a highly experimental subgenre of haiku poetry that poses many challenges to readers. *Gendai* haiku poets tend to embrace an understanding of 'freedom of expression' that is liberal even for freedom. Characteristic features of such haiku are the subversion, and emphasizing

the arbitrariness of, meaning, and the rejection of reviously accepted standards of form; the lack of *kigo*, or season words, in Japanese *gendai* haiku is a prime example of the latter. Many of Ban'ya's haiku can be classified as *gendai* haiku, not only based on his "confession" above, but also by virtue of its approach to 'meaning'.

In terms of the quality and style of the haiku included in each of its 11 chapters, *Hybrid Paradise* is not an even volume. In contrast with, for example, his earlier volume *Flying Pope* (2008), *Hybrid Paradise* is nowhere near as thematically tight. Although each individual chapter purports to be organized around a single unifying theme, such structure occasionally weakens, and at certain points even seems to dissolve and disappear altogether. The main reason for that, to me at least (an important condition, to which I will return momentarily), has to do with the style and meaning of some of the haiku.

The quality of understatement (simply put, to say more with less) is usually considered an important and desirable feature in haiku:

> For me, the aesthetic quality that stands out above the rest is *understatement*, by which I mean to include the related ideals of silence, restraint, subtlety, and suggestiveness. Understatement feels essential to haiku, not only to traditional style poems, but even to contemporary and experimental haiku as well. (Antolin 25-26, italics in original)

From those "related ideals," "suggestiveness" is the most important one for this discussion. Due to its brevity, haiku can (and should) never go into great detail about anything, and therefore the poet's choice of words are of utmost importance. The so-called "haiku moment," that instance of insight and realization (what Bruce Ross calls "an epiphany" [sec. V]), has long been widely considered the primary component of haiku poetry. This idea generally entails certain corollaries, e.g. that "haiku is about direct observation, haiku eschews metaphor, and haiku is about nature" (Shirane

[1] The issues that may arise from such an equation of '*gendai* haiku' with 'postmodern haiku' cannot form part of this discussion, but the main challenge would be the plausibility of applying theories of the postmodern (a *very* pregnant term indeed) to contemporary Japanese poetry. For the purposes of this essay, I will tentatively accept that such an application is possible.

121), which are first of all highly debatable,[2] and secondly, unnecessarily restrictive for this discussion. What one should take away from this as true and relevant is that haiku is a personal form of poetry, where the poet's role is to assign meaning to the words in the poem.[3]

John Stevenson suggests viewing (that is, reading) individual haiku as "two- or three-dimensional art objects" (61). In that framework, Natsuishi's *gendai* haiku would seem to be two-dimensional objects, "one that is intended to be viewed from a particular arc of perspectives" (62). Still, when reading *Hybrid Paradise* (or most of Natsuishi's recent works, for that matter), it is easy to feel completely, utterly, and irrevocably lost: one may feel that the "particular arc of perspectives" needed for making sense of the haiku is the poet's own.

> I think it is fair to say that a reader should be allowed to expect independent meaning […] of some sort from a haiku that is published with the intent to be read. […] Poets are needed to convey some sense of purpose to the chosen images, and in doing so they need to be conscious of the readers. […] Unless each haiku comes with an explanatory footnote, they cannot possibly know the mindset that spawned them. (Miller n.p.)

Paul Miller's point above is one that is often made by Western readers of modernist and postmodernist Japanes poetry, haiku included. Max Verhart, for example, mentions one of Natsuishi's haiku from his volume *A Future Waterfall* (2004):

> Going under the sea
> yellow light
> and purple music

At first sight, the poem seems undecipherable, at least without having access to the circumstances under which it was written. The reader seems to require access to "an individual's culture, language, and experiences" what Jim Kacian calls one's "mindspace" (59). Rearding that particular haiku, Verhart was luckier than most:

[2] See Haruo Shirane's essay "Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashô, Buson, and Modern Haiku Myths" for a more thorough discussion of the topic.

[3] It may sound all too obvious, but it is important to set the basics straight, especially when discussing a form of poetry as brief as haiku.

> As it happens I happen to have a copy of this haiku in the author's own calligraphy on a cardboard panel, the Japanese original on one side and the English translation on the other. […] I gather it was written during or after […] a trip by an international group of haiku poets going by shuttle train through the tunnel under the Channel from France to England and back, autumn 1997. So they were going under the sea, discussing haiku! And as I know from a short report […,] Ban'ya Natsuishi was among them. (Verhart 43)

Verhart also adds that "Interpreted that way, the haiku is quite realistic, if one can take 'purple music' as a poetic description of whatever the author was hearing" (43). However, the obvious question remains (and is asked by Miller as well): "how is the reader to know that[?]" (Miller n.p.)?

And the haiku above is certainly not the only one in Natsuishi's oeuvre with surrealistic overtones and leanings and/or overly subjective perspectives. Let stand here a few such examples from *Hybrid Paradise*:

Violent wind-
a thousand mice
pushing a car of fire

Buildings and tents
in Ulan Bator
night lightning

Carrying a poetess Mary
and her chronic illnesses
the airplane is heavy

A haiku reading of the rainy season
can it bring us
a Slovenian transparency?

Many of these haiku were no doubt written on particular occasions, with specific people and things in mind, which is certainly not a problem. What is often cited as an actual problem with Natsuishi's (with and other contemporary *gendai* haikuists') poems is that the "particular arc of

perspectives" from which such haiku make sense appears to be reduced to a single one, and that such haiku "are too personal for [readers] to understand fully, and that the writer is not taking readers' involvement into consideration" (Miller par. 20).

It may thus seem that Natsuishi and *gendai* haiku poets in general disregard their audiences, their readers when they don't provide all the information necessary to decipher the meaning of their haiku. Even if it may be true in certain cases, in my view the reader's role in constructing the meaning of haiku can be different based on the aim of the reading. If one is reading for aesthetic and intellectual pleasure, then it indeed is reasonable to expect haiku to be meaningful and to provide some sort of grounding that enables comprehension. After all, the Western way of looking at modern haiku is to consider them "small collections of words intended to manipulate mindspace [...,] supplying opportunity to explore our own and each others' resources" (Kacian 59). However, if one's reading haiku for a purely emotional experience, then it necessarily requires a different type of engagement on the reader's part. As I see it, many of Ban'ya Natsuishi's haiku work in a Dadaist fashion: they do not "make sense" according to commonly accepted frameworks, but instead they reflect on the inadequacy of such frameworks to express emotions and experiences not otherwise expressible.

In her discussion of Natsuishi's haiku volumes *Endless Helix*, *Hybrid Paradise*, and *Black Card*, Anna Cates concludes that the often tragic, disastrous, or unsettling events about which Natsuishi writes his haiku "seem to take on dimensions beyond the physical or natural. A supernatural, metaphysical aspect is embedded in the tragedies, leaving the poet grappling on multiple levels" (82). Natsuishi's haiku in general, and those in *Hybrid Paradise* in particular as well, are poems written from a highly subjective point of view, and the uncertainty of language and the inexpressibility of trauma are central to his poetic style. Natsuishi received his Master's degree in comparative literature from Tokyo University, and during his studies he familiarized himself particularly with the European avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century. Such studies evidently influenced his haiku along with earlier Japanese haiku poets such as Nagata Koi. Eric Selland, poet and translator living in Tokyo, in his sweeping overview of Japanese modernist

poetry references Natsuishi, saying he "writes wildly avant-garde haiku influenced by European Dadaism" (202). Dadaism was an art movement that emerged as a reaction to the all-consuming madness of World War I and as a reflection on the collective loss of a sense of reality caused not only by the war but also by Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, psychoanalysis, and Communism. In short, reality wasn't what it used to be, which applies very well to the recent decades of Japanese history marked by natural and also nuclear disasters. A quasi-Dadaist all-emotional response to a reality that seems to be breaking up around the poet, although definitely difficult to make sense of, is an adequate way of addressing traumatic experience.

The above may not be true to all *gendai* haiku. But given Natsuishi's education, experiences, and interest in and care for tragic and traumatic events (not only in Japan but all over the world), it is reasonable to attempt a reading of his haiku through the lens of Dadaism and other avant-garde approaches to poetry and art.

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